

John Kelman

The Shields of the Earth
Belong Unto God

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A SERMON

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The Shields of the Earth Belong unto God

By REV. JOHN KELMAN, D.D.

The Shields of the Earth Belong unto God—Psalm 47: 9

THE date of the writing of this psalm is uncertain, and indeed the internal evidence might hold equally well of practically any time in the history of Israel. In the psalm we see the chosen people looking exultantly round the nations and claiming the earth for Jehovah. To those who know anything of the history or even the geography of Palestine there is something almost amusing in this challenge of so small a nation to the wide world round it. The wandering tribes of Israel had no very creditable national history behind them when compared with the great swelling words in which other nations boasted of their past. Perched at last upon the narrow shelf of rock between the River Jordan and the sea, surrounded by the wilderness with its many miles of barren sand and clay, and cut off by it from the mighty Kingdom of Egypt on the south and the vast realms of Nineveh or Babylon on the east, it is difficult to suppress a smile as we see this little people from its rocky platform sending out its challenge across the desert which it never roamed, and the sea on whose waters it never ventured. *Now therefore kings be wise*, says Israel, and she takes herself quite seriously when she says it.

The situation, however, is saved from absurdity by one great conviction. Israel might indeed be

small among the nations and from every secular point of view might count for little, yet Israel had a God Who counted for everything. She was a small nation with a great God. It was in the name of her God that she displayed her banners, and when she rang out her challenge it was in His name, not in her own. No nation ever felt itself more defenseless than Israel, or more pathetically expressed its smallness, weakness, and homelessness. Beset with visible dangers from the mighty powers on either side of her, she has been well described as a lamb between two fighting bulls. To this day the memorial slabs cut in the living rock at the Dog River tell the story of countless invasions and incursions in which the great eastern empire and the Egyptian kingdom passed through the land of Palestine, using it as a stepping-stone for conquest. Besides these visible human enemies there was for Israel the whole world of terror both in the desert and in the sea, for these were the abodes of ghastly beings that could not be fought with material weapons, spirits of malign intent, about whom it was not well to speak nor safe to hear.

It is in connection with this that we see the force of the metaphor of the shield. Many centuries before this, after his long and homeless wandering, Abraham had felt the need of it and had given us our first example of it in the Bible. When that lonely and childless wanderer, about whose spirit the shadows and the dangers of life were gathering, found God in his vision, the words which described the Lord to Abraham were, *I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward*. In the literature of a far later date we find thanks given to the shield of

Abraham.* In the psalms written between these two we see how Israel nestled in the great metaphor. Down to the details of village life she stayed herself upon this assurance, *Except the Lord keep the city the watchman watcheth but in vain*. It is very beautiful and touching to think of each little hamlet putting out its lights and going to sleep upon the serene assurance that the eternal God would act as watchman in her narrow streets.

It is a great thought, this, that the heaven is the shield of the earth. For the Hebrew, conscious of his nomad ancestry, the blue sky seems to have been regarded rather as a thin and fine-spun texture of blue, like silk, while the Greek regarded the convex dome of sky as a metal shield held over the earth. The relations between heaven and earth have been so variously conceived by different nations that we may partly arrive at some idea of the national morals and thought by recalling these. We are familiar with the marriage between heaven and earth, and with the warfare between them. Heaven is often earth's dream and still more frequently earth's menace. It says much for any nation that it has attained to such sane calmness and confidence of faith as to call that blue sky, with its sunshine and its stars, the shield and hiding-place provided for it by the heavens. Thus we have in the very ancient literature of the farthest East, a hymn in which a people praying to its god, speaks as one who "rests in the sheen and shelter of Thy wings." This is by far the tenderest and best of all the conceptions of the relations between heaven and earth. In it we see heaven brooding like a mother bird over the earth, a beautiful and comforting thought for trying days. It leads us on to

*Sirach 51:12.

Jesus Christ, Who took it up and repeated it in His immortal words, *How often would I have gathered thee as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings.* Here we find the fulfillment of the ancient psalm, *Behold, O God, our shield, and look upon the face of Thine anointed.* Thus in Christ the conception as shield and protector comes to its perfection. He has for His special province the defense of man. But for Him man is indeed defenseless. Living enemies attack him. Poverty, disease, and death are forever threatening. Remorse for his past chases him like a bloodhound. Fears for some ambush of fate in the future lie in wait and beset his way. It is no wonder that men gloried in the discovery that God was their shield, and in the vision of that shield in Christ.

In the text, however, there can be no question that the metaphor of the shield is applied, not to God Himself, but to His representatives upon the earth. The shields that God uses to protect the earth, in the sense of this metaphor, are men whom He chooses for high station. As Dr. MacLaren has said, "The shields are a figurative expression for the princes just spoken of, who now at last recognize to whom they belong." Here then we are dealing with man's defense of man. The shields are the princes and the high officers of the nation, and it is through them that God chooses to defend His people against all manner of enemies.

No nation has had a larger share of these than you in America. Today we are thinking specially of two great men whom God chose for this sublime purpose. We celebrated the memory of Abraham Lincoln a

week ago—a man beginning life in humble circumstances in Illinois, educated by the world in which he lived into greatness for the defense of the unity of his land. Washington, that English gentleman of Mount Vernon, looking after his estates in serenity and opulence until God sent for him to defend his country. It is he of whom we specially think today. In his time this land of yours required a shield. It was attacked by hosts of mercenaries under an alien king, while as yet it was thinly populated and beset with dangers enough of its own. This man put himself between the people of America and the forces that attacked her. Safe behind the sheltering personality of George Washington you braved the world and won. To such men a country owes an eternal debt. They are God's shields that have defended you in the hours of your greatest danger, and this is their chief heritage of ideal and responsibility that they hand down to you today, that all men in high position be as they were, shields which defend the earth.

All this line of thinking should sound familiar enough to you in this particular year of grace. Three years ago I had the honor to be here pleading with you to come into the Great War, and who that saw America in those days will ever forget them? You came, and sent your sons, and in France we saw them go in, many of them to their death. Ah, that American idealism, how it lit the lamps of our weary troops! For every man you sent across the sea knew why he went. He went consciously and deliberately in defense of his home, of the honor of the women whom he loved, of the freedom of the land that was his. These were the shields that defended the earth

in those days, *the young men of the princes of the provinces*. Washington in his grave must have seen them and been proud of them as they marched past to war. As they died one by one he must have saluted them as they came, grave and experienced and devoted, across the barriers of death. He saluted the living too as they returned victorious to their homes. He remembered the day when the Hessian mercenaries flung themselves in vain upon the living shield he had set up for America. He remembered the generations of young Americans that have defended this land. Ah, they took themselves seriously, those boys of yours who went to war. It was in the high light of God's defense which He had entrusted to them the sons of men, that they volunteered and set forth.

Well, all that is over, and God grant the sword may stay forever in its scabbard. Yet we live still in dangerous and ominous times, and we know not what grim necessities may yet arise. Of this only I am very sure, that should the land and its liberties again need defending, they will not be wanting, those young and splendid shields of God. George Washington shall not have to blush for the heirs of his inheritance. You have enjoyed the benefits of an opulent and wonderful national life. You have grown rich, you have had many pleasures, you have attained to glory and prestige. There never will be a race of young Americans who will be content to enjoy these blessings at the price of your blood and toil, or that of those who went before you. We all know that when the call comes they will be ready again to defend the blessings that their fathers have gained for them.

But all this puts life in a very high light, and makes the soldier's calling a sacred and sacramental thing. If indeed *the shields that defend the earth are God's*, then you are God's when you make yourself the living shield of national defense for your land in any danger. It is an ancient thought and it has been a strengthening one. Cromwell at the storming of Bristol wrote in one of his letters, "Those gallant men of whose valor so much mention has been made—their humble suit to you and all that have an interest in this blessing is that in the remembrance of God's praises they be forgotten. It's their joy that they are instruments of God's glory and their country's good. It's their honor that God vouchsafes to use them." Such interpretation does indeed put military service in high light, showing to those of you who have fought or who may yet fight, how God has set you as a shield in the defense of your land. War is either this or it is wholesale crime. Either it is militarism or it is reverence and faith. War as we conceive it, and as God has set it before us as a challenge, is not a matter of pomp and circumstance, not a glory of masculine strength, not a mere patriotic fervor. It is an engagement in which you belong to God and are consecrated to His ends and purposes. The battle is the Lord's, and the defense of all that earth holds dear is in His hands. War is either this or else it is the insanity of the damned.

This conception is especially true of all officers, captains and leaders in the army. These are the men whom God sends to the soldiers as their shield. The history of all armies bears witness to this, and one remembers such names as Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, Drake and Nelson, Oliver Cromwell,

Lincoln and Washington. Millions of people looked to these men for their defense, and such men are always needed to make the loyalty of the rank and file effective. It is under their direction and control that armies can operate or nations act. Thus in a very special sense such great men are God's shields of the earth.

When we transfer all this to the sort of warfare that is always being waged in society, the same shield principle applies. I mean man's battle for justice and cleanness and humanity, and the long crusade of public morals. *Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war*, and there is much in common to the two kinds of warfare.

It is especially noticeable that here too the princes are the defenders and champions of the people. In ancient warfare the individual leaders counted for everything, and great and commanding personalities stood out from the ordinary men as the saviours of all situations. It may seem that in these latter days democracy tends to obliterate personality. Gradually, by the levelling machinery of education, the rank and file count for more and more, while we cease to look with the same eagerness and expectancy for dominating and commanding spirits. The incident of the franchise itself involves this, for every voter is, by the exercise of that office, necessarily constituted a shield of the earth.

We had better accept that fact frankly and recognize in every man one set for the defense of his fellows. It is a good way to look upon ourselves and our neighbors, this which regards whatever powers each has as being there for the defense of the na-

tion. Yet it must be confessed that even in the most extreme democracy personality remains. No matter how you level down the rank of outstanding men by legislation or level up the importance of lowly men by education, still in the end the best man wins and bears the heaviest burdens. It has always been so, and in every imaginable state of the future it always will remain so. This text accordingly will always have its application. The men in whatever kind of a state, who find themselves in places of highest authority and influence, will be to the end of time the shields and protectors of nations. It is they who give the watchwords and the lead which the crowd will follow. Thus the government is the shield of the nation. Magistrates, judges and advocates are its shield against injustice. Doctors of medicine are its shield against disease, standing between the living and the dead. Teachers and ministers are the shields of truth and knowledge. Captains of industry and chiefs of commerce are there not for private advantage, not to benefit themselves by exploiting others, but to guard the interests of the men whom they employ and of the nation whose trade or manufacture they conduct. Men and women of wealth are trustees of great causes, and are answerable for the effect or the want of effect of their money upon these. All parents and guardians of children must find this responsibility for defense at once their glory and their heaviest burden; the young are at the mercy of the experienced. All these, and all others who stand in important places, are the shields that defend the earth and the nation in particular. They are God's shields and He claims them and their shelter for His own.

In view of all this I cannot help feeling that today the two great lessons which come to us from the memory of George Washington are

- (1) Washington's appeal to the rank and file.
- (2) Washington's appeal to the officers.

(1) *Washington's appeal to the rank and file* is for reverence in public life. "Magistracy," says Matthew Henry, "is God's institution: He serves His purpose in it." Public life in every land somehow or other tends to get cheapened in these modern times. We need in the first place to rehabilitate the faith of our fathers in the commonwealth and what it stands for. We need to set public life in this high light as God's shield for the protection of the nation. Accordingly the text is a plea—and it is one which George Washington's whole life and character stand for—a plea for reverence in politics, in civic government, and in our professional and public life. It adjures us to make and then to keep our politics and our public life such that it is possible for any self-respecting man to reverence them; and then, having made them such, to reverence both the office and the man who holds it.

In these days that is a notable lesson. Reverence is being lost in the general *melée*. Everybody would aspire to rule, and there is no deeper vulgarity than the scramble in high station for private ends, for place and power, for individual ambitions or the party interests of factions. It has vulgarized our whole view of public life. It has accustomed multitudes of people to look upon those above them only as so many figures to be pulled down, and to look

upon themselves when their foot is upon the ladder as the only object which needs attention.

Of those who act in such fashions this text cannot be quoted. The shields that defend the earth belong unto God, but all place-hunters belong to the devil. One of the few really fine stories that are told of Frederick the Great is that of an occasion upon which something had been done by one of his officers in his name, of which even he was ashamed. He could not find words to express his rage and indignation, but paced up and down the apartment repeating again and again the words, "In my name! in my name!" The petty aims that degrade public life cannot possibly be followed in the name of God. When you take His name into your lips with regard to these matters, you at once feel the high responsibility of noble station and the cry of an undefended earth to its defender. When our rulers do acknowledge God, when they accept their high station and their posts of influence in this fashion, then the forgotten ideal comes back. Men reverence the shields that God has set about them. We reverence those who are over us either in authority, or knowledge, or in ability, as men whose high position we do not grudge, and who hold their office by true divine right. I am pleading in this not for absolutism but for a point of view. It is a plea for reverence, which is declining in these latter days. It is a plea that you will elect your rulers in God's name, and then reverence them in His name.

(2) *Washington's appeal to the officers.* By the term officers I mean those in responsible positions—the princes, whether the prince happens to be mer-

chant or scholar, teacher, medical man, or judge. To all these Washington would say, You have no right to your position except as servants of the Lord. The divine right of kings is obsolete, but the divine right in kings is eternal. There is no office or profession or advantage which ever finds its true measure until it settles its relation with God. In Him most literally we live; and if that statement be true of the meanest worm that crawls, how much more true must it be of those who rule men and stand in high station.

But all high places are also places of temptation. They may be used for selfish glory, for making money and for ambition. These things are possibilities of all exalted station. They are the three things that offered themselves to Jesus as temptations in the wilderness, and they will doubtless offer themselves for your acceptance also. It is not for me to tell you the details of your own work and position, but only to claim you for God whatever that work may be. It is to you that He has entrusted this land and its fortunes. Public morals are in your hands, the welfare of cities and of states, health, freedom and education. He expects of you a high sense of honor and great and clean loyalties to the welfare of your fellowmen. He counts upon your purity, your conscience, your honesty and your large-heartedness. You are not your own; you are not your party's; you are not even the nation's; you are His. You are not your own, to live for yourselves and use your high office for personal advantage. You do not belong to us, to cringe to popular opinion and please those you cater for. The king who belongs unto himself, always goes to swift ruin. The king who

is but the tennis-ball of the nation were better dead. The king shall glory in the Lord, and you are God's shield of the earth.

It is for this special purpose of defense that you belong to the Lord. You have taken His business in hand, and so long as you live upon this principle and in this remembrance you and we are safe. So long, but not one day longer. When that remembrance fades, and you continue to hold high place upon any other principle than that of defense, you become unsafe yourselves and consequently a public danger. We too belong unto the Lord, and if you disavow Him we have no right to obey you. Thus the balance of peace and power and safety in the state ultimately and essentially depend upon religion. Take then your exalted office very reverently, brethren. Realize the sacredness of your high calling. You are instruments for God's ends. You are His shields for the defense of His men and women.

Not only is it necessary, in order to fulfil the high ends of public duty, for those who hold office to remember the meaning of this phrase. It is also necessary for their own comfort and strengthening. The loneliness of persons in high authority is very great. The shields themselves—those living shields that God sets around their fellowmen—they need to be defended. Nothing could be lonelier and nothing in a sense more pathetic than the burden on the consciences of those who bear responsibility for the lives of others. If there are those here who have felt this or are feeling it I would entreat them to fall back upon this consolation, You are the Lord's and He is your shield as He was the shield of Abraham. Not more truly do the meanest of your dependents

feel the shelter of your presence and your power of defense, than you yourselves may find the same benefits when you think of God. When you forget that, and creep out from the shelter of His will and of His love, then God pity you in these latter days. So long as you are true to that He will keep you strong, and we and our children after us will bless God's name for you.

“Servants of God, or sons . . .

Then in such hour of need
Of your fainting dispirited race,
Ye, like angels, appear,
Radiant with ardour divine!
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,
Strengthen the wavering lines,
Stablish, continue our march,
On, to the bound of the waste,
On, to the City of God.”



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